

Luis Muñoz Marín Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 6/11/1965
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Luis Muñoz Marín (1898-1980) was the Governor of Puerto Rico from 1949 to 1965. This interview focuses on John F. Kennedy's visits to Puerto Rico, the political situation in Puerto Rico, and the debate over expanding the military base on Vieques Island, among other topics.

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Luis Muñoz Marin
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Oral History Interview

with

GOVERNOR LUIS MUNOZ MARIN

June 11, 1965

By Lee White

For the John F. Kennedy Library

WHITE: Today is Friday, June 11, 1965. I am Lee White. I am here with Governor Luis Munoz Marín, interviewing the governor in connection with the John F. Kennedy Library project for recording in a permanent fashion the recollections of those who had personal contact with the late president during his presidency. I am confident that among those whom the president enjoyed and admired is Governor Munoz. Governor, if there are no questions that you have, we can commence to discuss some of the personal recollections that you have of the president's contacts with you as an individual, with Puerto Rico as an island and as a people. If you have any general observation that you'd like to make first, that might be appropriate. When you're finished, I can, perhaps, ask some questions.

MUNOZ: I met Senator Kennedy on two or three occasions before he was elected president, but they were social occasions. The first time that I met him with a public purpose was about two days before his inauguration as president, in January, 1961, at his apartment at the top of the Carlyle Hotel in New York. We spoke of how prominent Puerto Ricans could be useful to the policy of the United States government in Latin America because of their knowledge of the language. By that, I didn't mean the cultural background--and because of their American citizenship and their knowledge of the psychological and cultural background of the United States, also. He was very interested in this. He asked me about Arturo Morales-Carrion. He was evidently considering him for a position in the government; and he did appoint Mr. Morales-Carrion [Arturo Morales-Carrion], as you know, several weeks later as a deputy assistant secretary of State for Latin American affairs. I believe we also spoke of Teodoro

Moscoso. However, about a month later, I was back in Puerto Rico when I got a telephone call from Dick Goodwin [Richard N. Goodwin] asking me, for President Kennedy, what my view would be of Teodoro Moscoso as ambassador to Venezuela. Of course, Teodoro Moscoso had been for many years our economic development administrator in Puerto Rico. He was one of the most successful, if not the most successful, members of my cabinet in the great effort of Puerto Rico towards economic growth. We were very sorry to have Teodoro Moscoso leave his job, although he had trained some very good assistants. But, of course, I said that I thought that he would be a wonderful appointment because of his economic knowledge, because of his dynamism, because of his personal friendship with President Betancourt [Romul6 Betancourt] of Venezuela. As a matter of fact, President Betancourt had suggested to me, by telephone in conversation sometime before, how wonderful it would be to have Teodoro Moscoso ambassador because he would understand the problems of Venezuela and the problems of the United States relationship. The first time I saw President Kennedy after he had taken office . . .

WHITE: If I may, before you go on with that, Governor, are there any other recollections you have of that January meeting, prior to the inauguration? I assume that it was a hurried meeting, but were there any other recollections that you have that might be interesting about other items?

MUNOZ: Yes, we talked briefly about Cuba. Of course, I had been hearing of these preparations of Cubans in Guatamala and in, I believe, Nicaragua for some kind of an action against the Castro government. Of course, I was entirely in favor of any action that promised success against the Castro government. My recollection is that I advised him that they should be used as infiltration people--I didn't know enough about it to know what the real, actual plans were--as infiltration people, not as a mass movement. Obviously, he didn't express his own view of it.

WHITE: You did mention, though, his concern that some of the people who would be representing the United States government and, of course, him, personally, should understand the language--not only the literal language, but the feel, the sensitivity, and so forth. Did that emerge as a strong consideration with him? I know that, subsequently, in the Vieques [Vieques Island] matter and some of the others, he had taken actions and indicated his appreciation of the sensitivities of human beings as human beings and as part of a group.

MUNOZ: Yes, he had a great understanding of the human values and the human factors in any given situation. No matter how complicated it could be with other factors. You mentioned the Vieques situation, that is still, I suppose, a top secret situation. It was as follows. I think that it was on my second conversation with President Kennedy at the White House, after he had become president, that he had evidently received a memorandum from the Defense Department in which they expressed to him the need of having a greater possession and a greater control of the island of Vieques, which, as you know, is an island off the eastern coast of Puerto Rico and one of the municipalities of Puerto Rico. And it has about seven or eight thousand

inhabitants. The Navy has--I don't know how far we should be identifying this here, but . . .

WHITE: Well, this will be classified; and, of course, the transcript will have the highest classification of any of the subject . . .

MUNOZ: But I mean, these facts are well known, anyway. But I think we'd better give some background here.

WHITE: Yes.

MUNOZ: The navy has had a training operation there for twenty years, or perhaps more. They occupy about two-thirds of the island. There is always a great discomfort on the part of the inhabitants of the island because they're being hemmed in by the navy properties. They're all very loyal to the United States; they're all citizens of the United States; they all believe that anything that is necessary for defense and is in their power to contribute, it is their duty to do so, but they don't always believe that the navy, when it says that something is necessary, is quite right. So, there is some kind of a friendly friction there. President Kennedy had this memorandum, and he asked me to talk to Senator McNamara about it. They wanted a much greater control and possession of Vieques. Some private correspondence went back and forth.

WHITE: Correspondence between you and President? You and McNamara?

MUNOZ: No, between McNamara that were taken to Puerto Rico by special armed, personnel messengers. I came to Washington again and saw McNamara; and he explained to me the necessity of taking over the whole thing as a necessity for the security and the defense of the United States. I told him that if it were really, absolutely and unequivocally necessary for the security of the United States, that, of course, we would do whatever we could do to facilitate the instrumenting of that very difficult decision. But my advice to him, even before he began to explain to me the details, was that it was a bad idea and that it should only be done if absolutely necessary. Well, he expressed his view that it was absolutely necessary and that he would appoint a team to get together with a team that I would appoint to discuss the conditions. The idea was that the armed forces, especially the navy but not the navy alone, would give up a number of properties they held in Puerto Rico that were no longer considered necessary for defense, so that Puerto Rico would be compensated for the loss of Vieques. And some money would be available to compensate the actual people of Vieques, to transport them to some region in the island of Puerto Rico, itself, and provide them with housing and other facilities. The teams talked together in Puerto Rico. Mr. Belieu [Kenneth E. Belieu], I think, was head of the Defense Department team; and Mr. Roberto Sanchez [Roberto Sanchez] who is now governor of Puerto Rico and, at that time, was

secretary of State of the commonwealth and lieutenant governor, headed the Puerto Rican team. They discussed this for three or four days. It was not a public discussion. It was at the beach house that the governor of Puerto Rico has near San Juan. They came to the tentative conclusions of what this exchange of properties would be. It was very favorable to Puerto Rico if you were thinking only of the economics of it. The whole navy was to move to Roosevelt Roads. They were considering Vieques as part of the Roosevelt Roads, and they wanted to complete their ownership and control of the island of Vieques.

WHITE: Part of it was that the entire island of Vieques had to become military.

MUNOZ: Yes, completely; and move the civil population out.

WHITE: Yes. Cemeteries and the whole . . .

MUNOZ: Yes, they insisted that even the cemeteries--the dead must be removed because the civilians would not be allowed to get back there on All Saints' Day, which in Puerto Rican custom is the day in November on which the people take flowers to the graves of their ancestors. The army was going to move entirely to the Salinas area, which they already owned. We provided them with seven or eight thousand acres there many years ago in exchange for some other land that they had. In essence, Puerto Rico was to get back all unneeded military property. That property which the United States Government had obtained from the crown of Spain as a result of the Treaty of Paris ending the Spanish-American War in 1898, that was, of course, to revert for nothing to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. That property which the commonwealth and, formally, the People of Puerto Rico (People with a capital "P" was the official title.) had transferred to the United States government for defense purposes throughout the years for one dollar, we would also get back for one dollar. That property which the United States had obtained by its appropriation and paid for it to private owners, we would have a chance to purchase it, either, for the cost price or for the present . . .

WHITE: Appraisal.

MUNOZ: . . . price. Of course, this meant all this military property that had no longer any military use, in exchange for which, the whole island of Vieques would be turned over to them. This was, economically speaking, very flattering, very good. But I thought it was very wrong. It had some constitutional difficulties. You cannot abolish a municipality in Puerto Rico without a vote of the people. And you'd never get the people of Vieques to vote for the abolishment of its own municipality. It could create--as I think I discussed with President Kennedy, mentioned it this way in talking with him on this subject--it could create the very strange situation of Vieques having a government in exile with no citizens on the island of Vieques, itself, because the mayor had been elected for four years. And you could not abolish a municipality

without the consent of the voters of Vieques; and the voters of Vieques would never give that consent. But, anyway, I had offered, however, that I would use all my influence with the voters of Vieques and with the public opinion in Puerto Rico, generally, towards that end, if it was absolutely and unequivocally necessary for the security and defense of the United States. But I had my doubts about this necessity. So, these two teams worked all this out. Of course, they had no authority to close any agreement; but they reported back here, and they reported back to me. I decided to ask President Kennedy to take the decision, himself, because it was such a grave decision--not from the economic point of view, but from the moral point of view and from the human point of view. I wanted to ask him to take the decision, himself, and not through any subordinates.

WHITE: In your view, was this of tremendous importance to the seven or eight thousand people on Vieques, or were they a symbol of the whole thing? Did you think that it was important enough to take the time of the president of the United States for the problems of seven thousand people?

MUNOZ: Oh, yes. It was important to them; and it was important to the feeling of the people of Puerto Rico, generally. And, of course, it would have been a tremendous propaganda handle for the Communists all over Latin America.

WHITE: That's right.

MUNOZ: So it was wrong from both points of view: people from Vieques, themselves; the people of Puerto Rico as a whole; and the image of the United States. I mean, it was just handing the communists a valuable propaganda theme. When the president went to Puerto Rico and he stayed with us at La Fortaleza, the Governor's mansion . . .

WHITE: This was when?

MUNOZ: This was in December, 1961. I think it was the fifteenth of December--on his way to visit President Betancourt in Venezuela and President Valencia* [sic] in Colombia. He stayed with us at La Fortaleza overnight. We had a dinner for him. He left the next morning. I had breakfast alone with him on the terrace of La Fortaleza in

* the president of Colombia during President Kennedy's visit in December 1961 was Alberto Lleres Camarge. Guillermo Leon Valencia was elected president of Colombia in May of 1962.

the morning, just a few minutes before he left for Venezuela. Then I brought the question before him. I explained to him especially the human value.

WHITE: Was he familiar with it at all up to that time, or . . .

MUNOZ: He was familiar with the general idea, but he wasn't familiar with the details of it. But he knew that there had been a negotiation, of course, about returning a number of properties to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico that were worth millions, many millions of dollars. He asked me, "Do you think that the exchange of properties is not satisfactory from an economic point of view?" I said, "No. Of course, there has been no definite agreement on that, but there would certainly be no difficulty in arriving at an entirely satisfactory arrangement from the economic point of view. From the moral point of view, it is wrong. And from the human point of view, it is deeply wrong." I don't think I even emphasized in that conversation the communist propaganda tool that would be manufactured if this idea went through. And I asked him, "I want you to take your personal decision on this. I mean, to look into it just as carefully as you can and take your personal decision because if you decide it's necessary, I'll go along with it. And I'm sure that most Puerto Ricans will go along with it. But make it your personal decision after you go deeply into it." He said he would, and he asked me to write him a memorandum on the details of this situation and to send it directly to his personal secretary, Mrs. Lincoln, [Evelyn N. Lincoln] so that he would be sure to get it directly, and it wouldn't get into complicated channels. I did that, and he answered me. He said I was right. He had read it, he had looked into it very carefully, and he said that I was correct--that it could not be done that way, that they had a great military need, but, certainly, it could not be done in the way it had been planned. He had given instructions that nothing be done along that line without conferring first with me and with the other people in the government of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, which was, of course, a great decision on his part. A great decision from the . . . It had the significance of his great understanding of moral and human values in a situation where the military values, evidently, were also strong. But they weren't decisive with him.

WHITE: Very interesting. You mentioned the president's visit to La Fortaleza and San Juan on his way to Venezuela. Are there any other recollections that you have of that particular visit? As I understand, he arrived one afternoon, spent the night, and left the next day.

MUNOZ: Yes, we met him at the airport in the course of the afternoon--it must be 3:00 or 4:00. And, of course, we had the military honors and all the ceremonies attached to that kind of thing. We went to La Fortaleza in his bubble car. The bubble was down--was on the car as I wish it had been the other time.

WHITE: Were you aware of any conversations that may have been held about the question of whether that bubble should have been up or down then because . . .

MUNOZ: Yes. Well, of course, all the security forces of the United States that go along with the president had been in Puerto Rico, and they had been in touch with the Puerto Rican police and the local office of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and all of the security forces and had made their plans for security. As you know, the Puerto Rican people are very loyal to the United States; they are loyal citizens of the United States. But we have a lunatic fringe of, perhaps, a thousand in two million and a half people--independentists. They're not mostly Communists. I don't think we have more than two dozen Communists in the whole island of Puerto Rico. But the independentists tend to be anti-American; and because of the nature of their cause, of their belief Of course, there is an Independence party in Puerto Rico that polls about twenty thousand votes, which is only about two and a half percent of the total votes cast in Puerto Rico. Well, they're peaceful citizens. They believe in independence the same as the Philippine parties believed in independence before. But I'm talking about the lunatic fringe, and they're less than a thousand; the Nationalists, and the M.P.I. and the Movement Pro-Independence. Among them, there are some terrorists. So, the Puerto Rico Police have to be always careful of that. In the car, going to La Fortaleza from the airport, the president was very hot; and he wanted the bubble raised. But the security man in the front seat--he was a U.S. security man; I don't know if he was with the FBI or the secret service--he thought it better not be done. So President Kennedy accepted his decision.

WHITE: When you say "raised," do you mean put on top or . . .

MUNOZ: No, taken off.

WHITE: Taken off.

MUNOZ: Taken off so that the air could come in.

WHITE: Lowered, then.

MUNOZ: Yes.

WHITE: Yes.

MUNOZ: But, of course, no untoward incident happened, and there were thousands and thousands of people all along the route, especially when we got into the narrow streets of the old city on the way to La Fortaleza. Then he came out onto the balcony of the Fortaleza. The crowd insisted that he would come on the balcony. He came out, saluted them and said a few words. We had a dinner that night in which Pablo Casals was invited. Casals had been invited to the White House about two weeks before that.

WHITE: I see.

MUNOZ: You remember that.

WHITE: Yes.

MUNOZ: . . . in which he held what he called a Casals Puerto Rico Evening. So Casals, who lives with us in Puerto Rico, was at the same table with us there. We talked mostly social talk. We talked briefly about the Cuban situation. I thought the CIA tended to be too friendly with the Cuban conservatives, and you couldn't have a conservative revolution against Castro in Puerto Rico. You'd have to have a liberal revolution against Castro. Of course, that was along the lines of his own views. He did say to me--we're talking, here, not for immediate publication . . .

WHITE: No, that publication date will be adjusted for whenever you want it.

MUNOZ: Yes. He did say to me, "You don't have to tell me about the CIA. I have suffered from it."

WHITE: Were there any other observations about the Cuban Bay of Pigs thing? This was in a social group at dinner.

MUNOZ: Yes. Well, there were about eighty people at dinner, but there were many tables. And at this table there were just about eight people: with Casals and his wife and my wife and myself and, I believe, the then Inter-American Affairs Secretary . . .

WHITE: Woodward [Robert F. Woodward]?

MUNOZ: Woodward, yes. I don't think that Woodward was within earshot of this particular part of the dialogue. I remember that the president was surprised--I don't know why he was surprised--when I told him that, of course, we had many exiled Cubans living in Puerto Rico and some of the very eminent ones working for the government of Puerto Rico. And I told him that Felipe Pazos, who had been the head of the Cuban Central Bank in the early days of Castro and, of course, had had to leave Cuba when Castro began showing his Communist leanings--and he was working for us then. He was working for the Government Development Bank of Puerto Rico. "Is he here?" "Yes." "Is he in this room?" I said, "Yes, he's in this room. He's at one of those tables out. . . . I don't know if he got to talk to him afterwards. Then, you know, he became one of what they call the "Seven Wise Men" in the Alliance for Progress. I don't know--is he still there?

WHITE: I honestly don't know. On the alliance, did the president have a chance to discuss with you either that night or the next morning when. . . .

MUNOZ: No, no. Not specifically. He suggested the general idea of it--that a peaceful, democratic revolution was necessary in Latin American if you wanted to prevent a violent, undemocratic one.

WHITE: Did he ever indicate to you in any way some of the problems of dealing with existing governments, at the same time trying to spur them to take actions that would make them more democratic? Are there any thoughts or recollections you have that would be along these lines?

MUNOZ: No, I don't have any specific recollections. We probably did, in some conversation, touch on that point. I remember that I had an appointment with him to speak about some Puerto Rican matter on the day in which the Peruvian military overthrew the elections in which Maya de la Torre [Victor Raul Haya de la Torre] was elected. Of course, I was in the anteroom, waiting to talk to him. Senator Humphrey [Hubert H. Humphrey] was there; and, I believe, Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] and some others. We were talking about this horrible thing of a democratic election being overthrown by the military. When I went in to see him, we had a brief talk about that and how difficult it was to deal with these situations. Of course, you remember, he refused to recognize that situation for a while; but he couldn't go on that way forever.

WHITE: I believe you mentioned in our earlier conversation, a telephone call you may have had from the president in connection with the shipping strike . . .

MUNOZ: Oh, yes. When I was in Washington--I think it was in June of '61; it may have been '62, but I think it was '62--there was a shipping strike. He asked me what the effects of the shipping strike would be on Puerto Rico. I told him, and he asked me to inform the attorney general about this. So I had my assistant, a lawyer, with me; and he got together with someone in the attorney general's office. It was part of the case that had to be made about the hardships of the strike, so as to apply the pertinent law to protect the public interests there.

WHITE: In the general relationships between the people of Puerto Rico and the people of the United States, I know that you have been certainly the most creative individual in urging that there be an examination, with a view to make adjustments more suitable to today's circumstances. But as I understand, you had some conversations with the president on this. That might be interesting for you to discuss.

MUNOZ: Yes. That was the subject on which I spoke to him most, in an official way, as the leader of the Popular Democratic Party of Puerto Rico, the majority party there, and as governor of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. In my first interview with him at the White House, not the one at the Carlyle Hotel a couple of days before the inauguration, I spoke to him and left a memorandum with him . . .

WHITE: This was when--the spring of '61?

MUNOZ: No, this was about February, '61--about four or five weeks after the inauguration. There was a need to do two things. One: to clarify the attitude of the executive branch of the United States government as to what the relationships of the United States and Puerto

Rico were since the approval of Law 600 [PL 81-600] and the approval of the constitution and the creation of the commonwealth of Puerto Rico. And two: to take a longer-ranged view of what this relationship should develop into. Of course, for the longer-ranged development of the situation, congressional action would be necessary. But we discussed the appropriateness of the executive having a view on what this should be, so that it could take leadership in accomplishing whatever result would seem to be mutually desirable for the people of Puerto Rico and for the United States as a whole. He was very sympathetic to that idea. He did, as a matter of fact, approve the memorandum . . .

WHITE: July 25 memorandum.

MUNOZ: . . . which is authorized to be read on July 25, 1961. July 25, as you know, is the anniversary of the founding of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico; and we always have a celebration on that day. He sent as his representative at that time, I believe, Senator Morse [Wayne L. Morse] to this July . . .

WHITE: Well, I know Senator Morse. . . . either that year or the year following. . . .

MUNOZ: No, because in '62 it was the vice president, Mr. Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], who represented President Kennedy at the twenty-fifth of July celebrations. Yes, it was Morse.

WHITE: One year, it seems to me, Senator Fulbright [James W. Fulbright] went. That was '63.

MUNOZ: That was '63, yes.

WHITE: And in '64, it was Secretary Wirtz [Willard W. Wirtz].

MUNOZ: In '64, it was Secretary Wirtz.

WHITE: So, you're right. It had to be Morse.

MUNOZ: But Fulbright was the last one who represented Kennedy. Wirtz was already under the Johnson presidency. So that was read. Of course, it was a very delicate document because he evidently didn't want to step into any of the powers of Congress. But he was very sympathetic to the needs of the people of Puerto Rico to have a sense of a stability in their relationship with the United States. I think he understood very clearly that statehood would be the economic ruin of Puerto Rico and that so would independence. And, besides, only about, at that time, about 33 percent of the people of Puerto Rico, if you can gauge by the election returns, favored statehood; and only about 3 1/2 percent favored independence. The rest of it favored the commonwealth. And with all the potentials of development that the commonwealth idea contains. That hasn't changed very much, the independence people have gone down one percent, the statehood people have come up 1 percent. So he understood very clearly, I'm convinced, that the commonwealth idea is

a fine idea in itself, but it has defects. It should be studied in depth and corrected. I asked him to appoint an informal commission to look, without publicity or pressure of immediate politics, informally into the potentialities of growth of this new, creative idea of commonwealth, which we regard as a deeply interesting development in the federal system of the United States and the federalist idea in the world, generally. And he did appoint this commission, as you remember. You were one of the members of it. Adolph Berle [Adolph A. Berle] was the chairman of it. Dick Goodwin . . .

WHITE: I believe that Adolph Berle was the only nongovernment member. Arthur Schlesinger [Arthur M. Schlesinger] was on it . . .

MUNOZ: Yes, Arthur Schlesinger . . .

WHITE: And Nick Katzenbach [Nicholas deB. Katzenbach] . . .

MUNOZ: Katzenbach . . .

WHITE: Abe Chayes [Abram J. Chayes] . . .

MUNOZ: Abe Chayes, who was then the counsel for the State Department. Dick Goodwin and yourself . . .

WHITE: That may have been the group.

MUNOZ: I think that was the group. Then we met with Dr. Fernos [Antonio Fernos-Isern] who was then resident commissioner from Puerto Rico to the United States and in Congress. Then we had several meetings. We had one meeting at the Hay-Adams [Hay-Adams Hotel], in which we more or less organized the way of working it out. Then we had another meeting at the Dorado Hotel in Puerto Rico, at which Mr. Polanco [Santiago Polanco-Abreu], the present resident commissioner from Puerto Rico, who was then Speaker of the House--was present, too. And Senator Lopes [Luis A. Negron Lopez], who was then and still is the vice president of the Senate of Puerto Rico. I think they were the Puerto Rican persons present in those discussions. As the result of those discussions, I had an exchange of letters with the president. That was in 1962. An exchange of letters were read by the then Vice President Johnson, who represented President Kennedy at the twenty-fifth of July celebrations that year, in which I mentioned the growth of the commonwealth and the direction it should have and he agreed that it should have growth. I mentioned my intention of recommending to the legislature of Puerto Rico that they legislate for a plebiscite in Puerto Rico on statehood, independence, and commonwealth growth.

WHITE: Yes.

MUNOZ: He approved that idea in his letter.

WHITE: As I recall, that was another delicate letter. All of these have to be put very carefully.

MUNOZ: Oh, yes.

WHITE: I recall his going over that correspondence very carefully before it left because of his awareness of the sensitivity of the way these words are handled.

MUNOZ: Yes. And for some reason, I had recommended that the word--you can set me right on this because we worked on this together--he either left out the word, "independence" or the word "statehood" from the letter, although my recommendation was that he mention them both and let the people of Puerto Rico vote on them all. Which of the two was it?

WHITE: It seemed to me that the way that . . .

MUNOZ: Not because he was against independence if the people of Puerto Rico should vote for it, nor against statehood if the people of Puerto Rico should vote for it. I mean, in principle, he wouldn't be. Probably, if he saw the economic ruin that would ensue, he would probably have had second thoughts on it. But, in principle, he was for self-determination beyond any question. But probably he thought that Congress would get worried about this.

WHITE: The word that gave him pause, as I recall now, was "statehood." He raised a question. He said, "Since statehood is a decision that Congress must make without regard to whether the people want it or not--I mean, the Congress is not going to make it if the people want it, we can't, by anything I say, commit the United States as a whole to the decision that the Congress must make."

MUNOZ: Yes. While independence is along the line of the classic self-determination position of the United States.

WHITE: And so rather than to permit the word "independence" to achieve some significance, as though he wanted that to by-pass the statehood in importance, I think there was some generic term that was used as alternative to what is the present relationship . . .

MUNOZ: Well, the letters are in the file . . .

WHITE: They're pretty public . . .

MUNOZ: . . . and they will be a test of our memory.

WHITE: Certainly, not our intent, though. In any of your numerous conversations with the president, did he speak about individuals? Did he have, for example, anything to say about Betancourt [Romulo Betancourt] or Figueres [Jose Figueres] or anyone else--Peron [Juan Domingo Peron] . . .

MUNOZ: Yes, he had a very high opinion of Betancourt. Betancourt is, of course, the most symbolic figure of the present time in Latin America in the sense that he has held off the military on the one hand and the Communists on the other hand and has succeeded in carrying out a very important economic and social reform movement in Venezuela. He is the first president of Venezuela, excepting dictators, to complete his term, if you can say that dictators have terms. He had

a very high opinion, also, of President Figueres of Costa Rica. But when Kennedy became president, Figueres had already ceased to be president of Costa Rica. They have no reelection clause in their constitution. But he was still the most prominent citizen of Costa Rica and, of course, a great supporter--he didn't always agree with United States policy--but a great supporter, basically, of the United States policy and of the United States role in the world and in the hemisphere.

WHITE: Do you recall any unfavorable comments that President Kennedy may have made about any Latin American leaders or any Latin American situations?

MUNOZ: No, I don't . . .

WHITE: For example, did he ever speak to you about the Brazilian problem with Goulart [Joao Belchior Goulart] and . . .

MUNOZ: No, he didn't. At that dinner at La Fortaleza that night, he asked me about Brazil; but I didn't feel that I was well enough acquainted with the situation to express any views.

WHITE: Did he ever have occasion to talk about the problems of religion and state in government? Did he comment on your own experience with the bishops in any way--serious or humorous?

MUNOZ: Oh, yes. Yes. You remember that in the 1960 elections, the bishops of Puerto Rico published several pastoral letters saying that to vote for me or for the Popular Democratic Party was a deadly sin. We had a very difficult campaign on that; but the bishops were supporting a new party called the Christian Action Party; and they only got about 6 percent of the votes, while we got about 58. In one conversation, the president told me that he figured that that controversy had cost him--because, you see, the elections in Puerto Rico take place on the same day as the elections in the United States, on the same Tuesday in November. The attitude of the bishops in Puerto Rico, which, of course, became very widely commented on in the press and outside of the press in the United States, tended to support the whispering campaign that a Catholic president would be too subject to the outside influence of the church as a foreign power. That had been the argument against Al Smith [Alfred E. Smith]; and it had been the argument throughout history in the United States, until Mr. Kennedy, by his victory, destroyed it. Nobody knew how this would come out, see. After all, these were American bishops in Puerto Rico. I'm glad to say that all bishops are not Puerto Ricans--perhaps as a result of that mistake. But the Puerto Ricans, although of Latin extraction and culture, are American citizens. And the propaganda could easily be, and probably was, and certainly President Kennedy thought that it had been--I mean, the whispering propaganda--that, "Look at the way they do. Can we let this happen in the whole United States?" And he thought that that had cost him anywhere between a million and a million and a half votes. I think that it is probably a very correct estimate because it was a very, very bad situation.

WHITE: Was it because of the fact that it added fodder to the religious issue? Or because of the fact that it gave some credence to those who complained that the religious leaders would attempt to exert influence over a Catholic?

MUNOZ: The latter, I think. It certainly gave credence to. . . . Well, they saw religious leaders trying to influence, telling people that they would literally and theologically go to Hell for eternity if they voted for a certain political leadership and for a certain political party instead of for another.

WHITE: I would expect the point to be made, though, that you as a governor and as a Catholic weren't particularly taking orders from them either--so that the fear that people might have that a Catholic president might succumb to these pressures certainly had a powerful answer in your own experience.

MUNOZ: Yes, yes.

WHITE: So to that extent it wasn't all lost.

MUNOZ: Anyway, this was . . .

WHITE: Did he ever make any . . .

MUNOZ: . . . this was what he thought. And I went to Europe in '62, and I saw Pope John [Pope John XXIII] of course, we talked about this Puerto Rican matter. And he asked me to give the details to one of his monsignors there. But he said that he would do what was just. He certainly couldn't keep track of everything that happened in the Catholic church everywhere in the world but that once that it came to his attention, he would see to it that what was just was done. And within two months, this situation was corrected. When I came back from Europe, I remember that I asked for an appointment with the president from Europe. I telephoned or sent a cable to . . .

WHITE: O'Donnell [Kenneth P. O'Donnell]?

MUNOZ: O'Donnell, yes. And he said, "Well, when you come up, just telephone; and we'll certainly get together." Because I wanted to talk to him about this plebiscite idea. But I had seen the pope on that trip to Europe; and when I came back and we spoke on this plebiscite idea, at the time of the exchange of letters that we mentioned a short while ago, I told him, "It won't happen again. Insofar as you may think that that did harm in the national elections in the United States, it won't happen again." He was very happy, indeed, to hear this. Now, I did tell him, I think, before that, at the time of the Casals [Pablo Casals] dinner--that's going back about a year or almost a year--at the Casals dinner in the White House, I had told him that I was sooner or later expected

to see the pope on this matter, and that anything that he could do would be very helpful. Well, he didn't tell me what he would do; and I don't think that he should have told me what he would do. And I don't know if he did anything, but perhaps he did.

WHITE: Let's just assume so. Are there any anecdotes that come to your mind--any evidences of humor on the president's part, either when he was visiting you at La Fortaleza or here? As you know, his charm and his wit were so pervasive, I just wonder if there is anything that sticks in your mind that . . .

MUNOZ: Not anything in particular; just his spirit, for instance, on these social occasions and. . . .

WHITE: On this Casals dinner, here, with the whole emphasis on Puerto Rican culture, are there any recollections you have there of his discussing it with you in advance or anything else or how deep?

MUNOZ: No, he called me up on the phone and just asked me what I thought of the idea of this Casals-Puerto Rico dinner. I thought it was fine. Then I arranged all the details over the phone with Dick Goodwin, as I remember it. If this is of any historical importance, which I deeply doubt, he spilled some wine on a new dress that I had bought for my wife.

WHITE: How did he handle that situation? [Laughter]

MUNOZ: But I'm sure it was the best French wine. Well, that was at another table. You know we distribute the tables. He was in another room, and I was at a table with Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis].

WHITE: Do you have any remembrances of anything that the president may have indicated about the peculiar problem of the Puerto Ricans who have come to the mainland, those especially in New York City and elsewhere--either from a political viewpoint or from a viewpoint of the special economic and social problems?

MUNOZ: No, I don't think he was always very anxious to do anything in his power to better the conditions of Puerto Ricans in New York and other cities and states and to help them in their adaptation to their new environment. Politically, of course, he knew that Puerto Ricans would overwhelmingly vote for him and for the Democratic party.

WHITE: I remember one time when the president was very interested in how campaigns are financed in this country--the experience of Puerto Rico in your own arrangement whereby the tax funds were used to assist in campaigns, thereby giving some fairness and also some restraint. This had a great deal of appeal to him, and I wondered if you might ever have mentioned it to you informally or formally.

MUNOZ: Yes, we talked about it briefly on one of these occasions. Evidently, he was so interested in that problem of the financing of political campaigns--I mean, that people, just because they had more money than others, wouldn't have a special influence. As a result of political campaigns, he was interested in that, which showed to me certainly a disinterest on his part because he could certainly finance political campaigns better than most others. And it showed that from the point of good democracy, he believed that that should not be so--that that advantage should not lodge with people who happen to have more financial resources than others. He was interested in our Puerto Rican way of doing it, as we talked about it on one or two occasions. Evidently, he was interested enough when he appointed a commission to study this problem for possible action and legislation to be recommended covering the United States as a whole, he asked the commission to study the Puerto Rican legislation and the Puerto Rican experience; and he said so in his press release that he gave out when he appointed the commission.

WHITE: Well, I've exhausted my list of items, here. I think, indeed, we have hit on a few very interesting things and many that I don't think, otherwise, will be a matter of easy permanent record. I would hope that when the transcript is prepared and available to you that we would be able to, perhaps, add some additional ones that may occur to you. And, of course, as you go through your own papers, as I know you're going to do, you may find some notes that will jog the memory again. But I'd say that this is . . .

MUNOZ: Yes. And, certainly, anything that I think might be of interest, I'll make available to you. But some things are not important to affect the course of human destiny. But historians fifty years from now and a hundred years from now would like to have small details, like spilling of wine. It may have been one of the last times in which French wine was served.

WHITE: In the White House. [Laughter] Well, that was pretty early in President Kennedy's administration, so I suppose there were at least quite a few dinners following where it has been served. Governor, I thank you; and we will certainly send you the transcript as promptly as possible.

MUNOZ: It's been a great pleasure and a sorrow, in a way, to recollect these conversations.

WHITE: Yes, it is a little painful.

MUNOZ: President Kennedy was a fine friend, and we all in Puerto Rico had a very deep regard for him.

WHITE: Just as a parting thought, it occurs to me, is there anything that you think worth noting about the reaction in Puerto Rico to the assassination?

MUNOZ: It was tremendous, it was tremendous. It was tremendous sorrow, tremendous grief, tremendous questioning as to the logic of a universe in which such a senseless and tragic thing could happen. I remember that my daughter had put up a Puerto Rican flag at half-mast. And she refused to take it down, and it's still there in our house.

WHITE: Again, Governor, thanks very much. We appreciate this.